

Another education funding plan joins the mix in Washington

By Donna Gordon Blankinship, Associated Press

Published: February 25, 2014, 10:34 AM

Updated: February 25, 2014, 1:22 PM



The Legislative Building at the Washington state Capitol in Olympia on Jan. 9. (Ted S. Warren/AP)

SEATTLE — Another government proposal for increasing state dollars for Washington public schools was dropped into the already overloaded cart on Tuesday.

The proposal from Senate Democrats gives lawmakers another option for answering a state Supreme Court order to reform education financing. The court's last communication with the Legislature asked for a concrete plan by April 30.

The Senate Democrats have proposed closing about \$100 million in tax exemptions and putting that money into class-size reductions, all-day kindergarten, basic costs like textbooks and salary increases for educators.

"It's urgent we take action this session to fulfill the promise we made to the children in our public schools," said Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe, D-Bothell. "It's going to take new revenue to fulfill this obligation to our students, and reducing class sizes for our children and grandchildren should be more important than preserving tax loopholes for big oil."

Among the tax exemptions the Democrats want to close include one for oil refineries, another for bottled water and a sales-tax exemption for people who don't live in Washington state.

Gov. Jay Inslee endorsed the Democrat's plan, which is similar to the education plan he presented in January.

"The Senate Democrats today presented a sound plan that puts our children ahead of tax breaks and moves us forward on funding education," Inslee said in a statement. "This plan shows students, educators, parents and the court that we're serious about funding our paramount duty."

In January, the governor said he wanted to close \$200 million worth of tax exemptions and put another \$130 million into public-school needs like textbooks and computers. He also wants to put \$70 million in salary increases for teachers and other school staff.

Earlier this week, the Senate's majority caucus proposed using just over \$38 million to pay for technology-related materials and supplies for classrooms. Republican leaders said they would use new dollars coming into the state because of the economic recovery to pay for this and other budget increases.

House leaders say they will present their budget plans on Wednesday.

Education leaders from both political parties are meeting with the governor to talk about how they should respond to the Supreme Court's 2012 McCleary decision, which found the way the state pays for public schools to be unconstitutional.

The court called for more money to pay for existing education reforms, as well as a shift away from depending on local tax levies to pay for costs like transportation, teacher salaries and classroom supplies.

Lawmakers and policy experts say the Legislature needs to find between \$4 billion and \$5 billion in new money by the end of the 2017-2018 school year.

Last year, lawmakers put about \$1 billion more into the education budget to make a down payment on that estimate to fulfill the requirements of the McCleary decision.